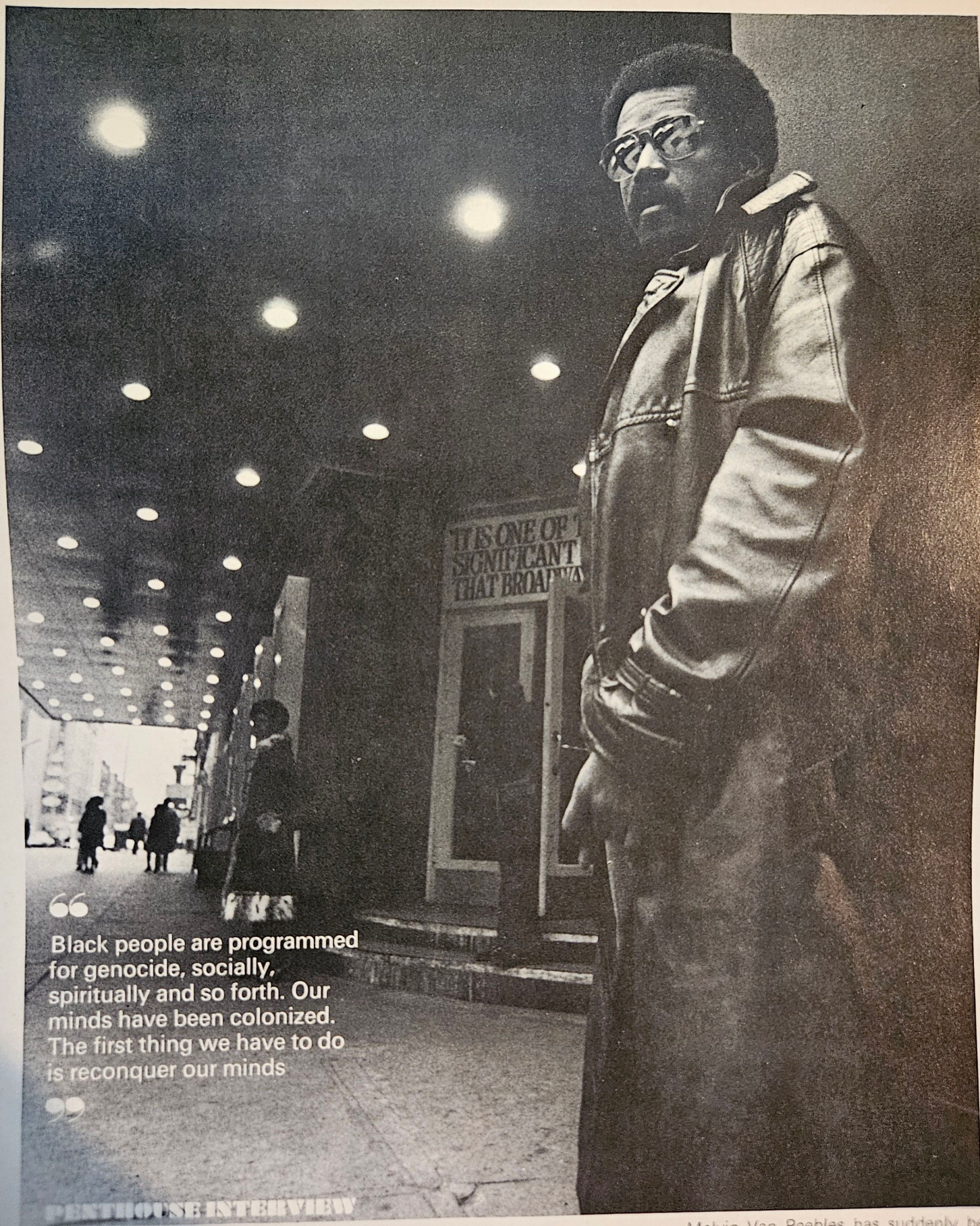




“
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The first thing we have to do
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”

PENTHOUSE INTERVIEW

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

Melvin Van Peebles has suddenly become a titan of show business. His film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* has grossed 11 million dollars. His first

Broadway show, *You Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death*, won a Tony Award. His second, *Don't Play Us Cheap*, is running well after receiving wide critical acclaim. He has made an album of the music from it as well as a film version of the show. He is now converting *Natural Death* into a film. And he'll soon be making another film, a social comedy called *The True American*. Melvin Van Peebles is an awesome combination of artist and businessman. Though *Natural Death* opened to mixed reviews and was expected to fold, Van Peebles wouldn't let it. He went into the ghettos, sold tickets at discount, whipped up interest and bused poor people to his show. Most of them had never been inside a Broadway theater in their lives. Word spread to Philadelphia and Washington and he began busing theater parties from those cities. The show became a hit. Van Peebles believes that every time he brings somebody to the theater who has never been there before he is building an audience for the theater in general and for his work in particular: "If a kid shows up at the box office and he's got only two dollars, well, then he gets in for two dollars. I'm not going to turn him away." He can afford the gesture. And he doesn't have to consult his backers because there aren't any. He owns 100% of *Don't Play Us Cheap* and makes about \$10,000 a

week from his \$34,000 dollar gross. Equally at home as producer, director, writer and composer, Van Peebles moves fast, makes decisions fast and often wings it. He filmed *Don't Play Us Cheap* in Santa Fé, New Mexico before bringing it to Broadway. When the show opened his actors had had no opportunity to gear their comedy timing to a live audience except for two preview performances. Of critics who accuse him of "gimmickry" and merchandise-wise opportunism, he says: "Shit, what the hell do they know about struggle?" He points out that an opportunist would not have done what he did in breaking a three-picture contract with Columbia in a dispute over how to direct Godfrey Cambridge as he saw fit in *The Watermelon Man*. His path to absolute control and freedom in his work at the age of 39 took him from Ohio Wesleyan College (he was born in a Chicago ghetto) to a motorman's job in San Francisco, and then to Amsterdam university in the Netherlands, where he worked on a graduate degree in astronomy. Somewhere along the line he acquired a wife, two children and, finally, a divorce. His film-making career began in San Francisco after a "bad flick" prompted him to accept his own challenge, that even *he* could make a much better movie. His early work brought him an invitation to Paris where

he followed the French adage "l'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace" (audacity, audacity, always audacity). He also brazenly tattooed that now famous inscription around his neck, *Cut on the dotted line!* with a sort of P.S. tattooed in the rear, *If you can!* Out of France came his first major film, *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*, financed by the French cinema industry in 1966. Then came the invitation to do *Watermelon Man*, which brought him back to the States. Requiring autonomy while aware that autonomy is a right reserved for studio presidents, Van Peebles established himself as a studio and financed a film on his own. To save money he cast himself as the hero, cast his own son in a controversial sex scene, begged and borrowed film stock and hustled a studio and a film laboratory into deferring costs. Six months later, after weathering critics who said he would never get the project off the ground, the versatile Van Peebles sat back owning 100% of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. It is estimated that the film has put 3,000,000 dollars into his personal account, thus far. The exclusive Penthouse interview was conducted by Charles Childs backstage at New York's Ethel Barrymore Theater, where, his cigaratello gripped firmly in one hand, Van Peebles seemed like the black man's answer to Mount Rushmore.

Penthouse: Before we get into larger issues, what made you call your production company Yeah, Inc?

Peebles: Well, it makes it easier to answer the phone. When I pick up the receiver I just say: "Yeah, what is it?"

Penthouse: An interesting reason but a little unorthodox.

Peebles: Who's to say what's unorthodox? If I say it's cool, it's cool. To say I have to do anything orthodox is just another way of keeping your foot in my ass. The first beachhead, the very first thing we must do is reconquer our minds. That's why I believe that the biggest obstacle to the revolution in America, the black revolution, is our conditioned susceptibility to the white man's program. In short our minds are colonized. We've been violated, confused and drained by this colonization, this brutal calculated genocide out of which the most effective and vicious racism has grown. Yeah, Inc. represents my small attempt at reversing this process.

Penthouse: How did your interest in film and theater begin, then?

Peebles: It began at the Fillmore Theater in San Francisco. I was sitting in a movie one day, one of those movies where the black stereotype is so reinforced that the brother in the part nearly has his balls cut off, and I said: "Shit, I can do better than that". From this self-imposed challenge, I started filming. I found a guy who had a camera and I said I wanted to make a film. He said: "Do you want it in 16 or 35?" And I said: "What the hell is that?". I didn't even know the difference between 16 and 35 millimeter film. But that didn't matter. I didn't even know what directing was, or editing was—any of that shit. Eventually, after the word got out that I was making a film, some guy came by



my house. He was a nice guy who said: "I hear you're making a film; welcome to the San Francisco experimental film makers. Do you lean towards Eisenstein?" Well, all I could say was: "Who's that?" Now that I look back I realize I went into film not out of a love for film, but because I was disgusted with the same old crap they were dishing out at the Fillmore.

Penthouse: Did you keep up any links with the San Francisco underground film people?

Peebles: I met a few of them as I went along but I couldn't honestly say they influenced my work. I was going to the movies, underground and regular, like everyone else. After completing my first film, a short, I projected it on a wall—only something didn't make sense. It seemed to run too long, so I shortened it. It was only later that I discovered what I had done is called editing. Even to this day I keep a tight shooting ratio because I began filming by paying for the footage with my automobile and lunch money, a good way of getting into the habit of not letting film roll on and on.

Penthouse: There was an interlude in Europe during this early period. How did that come about?

Peebles: I began to get things to do. I was working in the post office sorting letters—San Francisco, Sausalito, South Chicago, London, Paris. All of a sudden I just decided. I started gambling and got the bread together and left. My decision was to go to Holland because it was one of the cheapest places to get an education and use my G.I. bill. In the meantime, passing through New York, I got those first films I had made distributed. They were exhibited on the art film circuit, which is how I got invited to Paris.

Penthouse: You spent nine years in Paris,

didn't you?

Peebles: Yes, from the point where some of my early films got seen in Paris, the French cinematic people had been sympathetic to me. I think a lot of cats would have been grateful for just that recognition, but I figured, hell, you can't live on sympathy. The French congratulated me and kissed me on both cheeks and I didn't even know a word of their language. So there I was on the Champs Elysées with not a penny and two wet cheeks. Okay, now what? To make the next step, I had to make a decision. Either now or never. Since I was in Paris and the decision was made in Paris, I decided to stay. I know a lot of cats who think if they try hard they are going to win. Bullshit. When I made that decision, it was to try hard and keep on trying to win until I die.

Penthouse: One of the things that's often thrown at black American artists who go to Europe is that Europeanization detaches them from their roots. Richard Wright, for example, has been criticized along these lines. Did this affect you in any way?

Peebles: In the first place I don't deal with any of that shit. Europe ain't at all relative to where I'm at or where I've come from. I'm not about to jump into that trick bag of examining my identity, as I know who I am. In a certain way I was never in Europe. I can't even begin to deal with that question because it is so elementary. If you see a cat running from the cops and he jumps in a garbage can to elude them, he did what he goddam had to do in order to make it. Now to come along and throw the garbage can up at the guy as if it was special is ludicrous. This expatriate tag is the same as that garbage can. It is irrelevant. I went where I could get the job done. If they would have let me make flicks in China, I would have gone there. A prizefighter takes on all comers anywhere in the world. For me, at the point where I decided I was going to try to achieve a certain destiny, I was ready to

take the blows so long as I was moving, and all the moving wasn't smooth. I had to entertain in cafes, pick up odd jobs, just to eke out an existence.

Penthouse: So the benefits of Europe must have been the lack of racism compared to that existing in the United States.

Peebles: To some extent that's true. You don't have America's traditional hard line towards blacks. However, each country does have traditional hard lines against various chosen minorities. In France it just does not happen to be black. If you speak the language well enough and you really delve into it, you'll see racism below the surface, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. They just don't have the numbers of blacks in France, enough to make it a hard and fast problem to be solved with hard and fast racism. Consequently, you can slip through here and duck through there, and so forth. The European economy and society being what it is, there are a lot of French guys who want to make films and find it impossible. So when you consider a foreigner like myself going over there and ending up as I did, the French delegate to the San Francisco film festival, that was one hell of an accomplishment, black or white. If I could do that in France it just shows what an enormous impossibility racism is in America. But you have to understand the way I had my program planned from the very beginning. For one thing I didn't go cinematic at all. I worked in France as a commercial writer . . . I wrote five novels, partly with the knowledge that there is a French law that says a French writer has the right to a director's card to make his own film. That's how I got my French director's card, otherwise I would never have been able to come up with the money to make my first feature-length movie. By establishing my rep as a French writer, I began that process.

Penthouse: Since you've overcome your early hurdles, have there been changes in your life

or life style?

Peebles: No I don't see any radical changes. It's all been a steady build-up. Somebody published a book and that got me a better job and I got two books published and I got me another job and another book published, and so forth. Then after nine years the same things have been continuing, only now it has just come to everybody's attention. As far as I am concerned it's just a continuation from the day I started running the con game, to raise the bread to get the ticket to go to Europe.

Penthouse: It would be natural to expect some changes with success—an improved standard of living, for example.

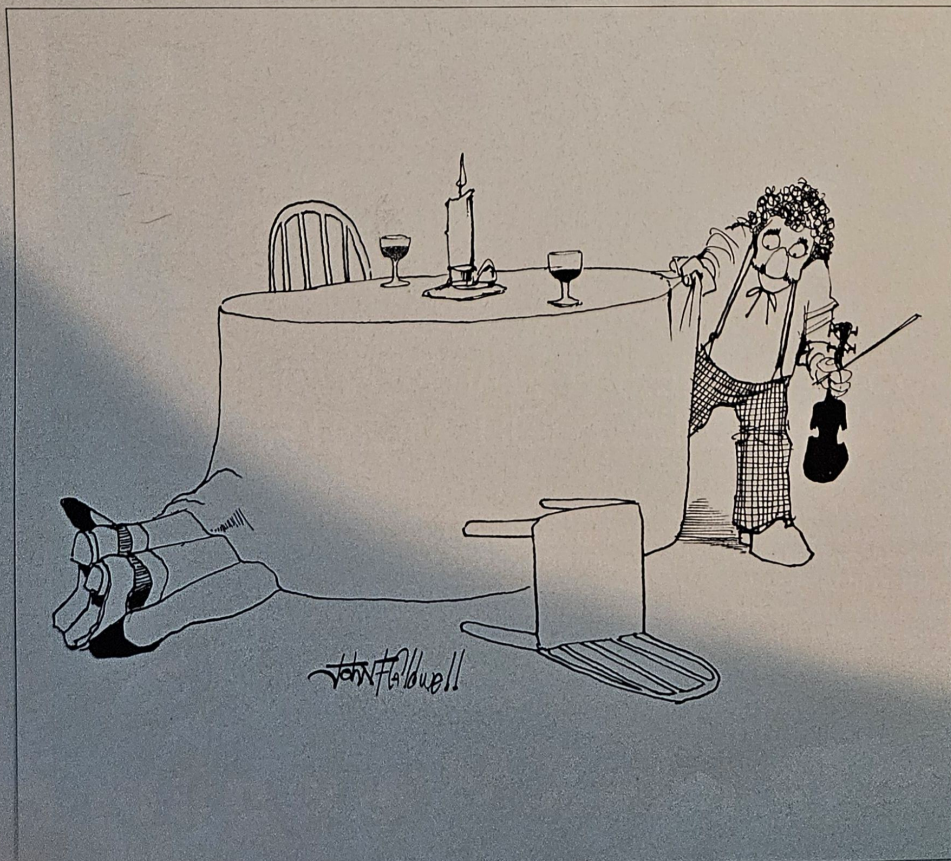
Peebles: You have to understand that with the sexual reputation I had in Paris I could have had a countess taking care of me. I could have taken that short-cut except for the realization that the countess hadn't got anything to do all day except walk you around, as sort of her two-legged poodle and you can't get any work done. The clothes, the yachts, that option has always been open to me. I mean I can get pussy in a phone booth, in other words. So that's no big deal.

Penthouse: Was the shift from writing those early novels to directing your first film a difficult one?

Peebles: I didn't make the shift, I just did what had to be done next. The main thing was getting myself together. Then, anything was possible. But that was years before France, or movies or books or music. In the past I used to not get along with myself because the *me* I wanted to believe I was, came to be always battling with the *me* I really was. The really me always won, naturally, but not before a great deal of time and energy had passed and reams of tension and general bullshit had constipated and polluted me around. Anyway, one day I figured out, hell, in the name of efficiency if anything else, why don't I just do from the start what I'm going to end up doing anyway. In order to do that I had to install the real me in power.

Penthouse: When you say you just move ahead and get the job done, presumably some research or training occurs before you begin moving forward?

Peebles: Whatever I need to do to get the play or the film on, that's what I do. I found the best approach is the direct approach. If the man's foot is in your butt you just figure out how to get it. That is about as much research as you need. When I decided to do *Sweetback*, I made a list of the "givens" in my situation. I knew I wanted a no-cop-out film, one that black people could see and walk away from instead of avoiding each other's eye. I wanted a high quality standard that would stack up against other competitive products. Also I knew the film, if it was to be effective, had to be a mother-fucker entertainment-wise. To attract a mass audience I knew I had to produce a work that not only instructs but also entertains. Otherwise it would end up playing to an empty theater except for maybe 10 or 20 brothers who would pat me on the back for telling it like it is when I obviously would be unsuccessful. Another "given" was that I wanted 50% of my shooting crews to be Third World people, and of course I needed money. Now you might call this research or training, but I just call it common sense. You move from one thing to another because you have to move. It's like saying "Hey man, how come you're selling wrist watches today and hats tomorrow?" Whatever pays! Whatever gets the job done! All along the line there were people who said: "Oh, you're doing this, overstepping this line." Those people never wind up



doing anything.

Penthouse: You do your own thing to make money, but what about message? Do you attempt to convey something?

Peebles: I think the theme is obvious. It's not limited to American blacks. It is, in a very significant way, African. It simply says there is a black way of talking, a black way of making music, and possibly even a black way of shooting a movie. Obviously all of this, at its root, is African. I upset some people because they figure that as a minority blacks must try and ape the mainstream culture. Bullshit! The truth is, and I've demonstrated it now time and time again, that the technical style is indigenous to its roots. I don't put black people on the stage, supposedly at a house party, and have them act false. The music is black music, the laughter is black laughter. Consequently, when people come to see my plays it's possible for them to see a black life style. It's an attempt to return our black image to ourselves.

Penthouse: Some blacks object that you are obsessed with the ruined landscape of black life instead of positive characterizations and images.

Peebles: Well, see, one of the big problems facing blacks is that we don't have a library, a full spectrum of many types of artistic images. Now what they say about the grimness of *Sweetback* I agree with, because in actual fact black life in America is grim. Still, the thing to keep in mind regardless is how black is not singular, it's plural. In my current musical, *Don't Play Us Cheap*, the entire book is on the up-side. It's the story of a Saturday night party, where people have fun and sing and so on. Any day now I expect my critics, who accuse me of being obsessed with ruined landscapes, to say: "He's all roses." As I produce more work

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“
Too often we become victims
of our own racism. Black
boxers suddenly become
experts commenting on
world events. I don't see
myself in that kind of hustle
”

and as other black authors add to the library, people will begin to see a much larger and more diverse image of blackness. Today I am wearing a blue shirt. You might ask: "Melvin, what is it that blue shirts have for you?" I might answer: "That's what I put on this morning, man! Why the hell do I have to write a long dissertation on blue shirts or anything I decide to do?"

Penthouse: Still, isn't it difficult to ignore an important black critic like Lerone Bennett? He was critical of the way you depicted black women in your *Sweetback* film as prostitutes or loose women.

Peebles: That's what *he* said. I don't agree with those critics but they spelled my name right, didn't they? As long as the people in the street got the message, that's what counts. All I can say is: "Early to bed, early to rise, work like hell and advertise".

Penthouse: You did depict *Sweetback* as a black stud. Were you endorsing the stereotype that claims black men do this best?

Peebles: No. That has nothing to do with black cats—that was *Sweetback*. I remember a movie I saw a few years back with Alan Ladd playing Jim Bowie, and there was a fight in a New Orleans brothel. Some guy says, "All right, choose your weapon", and Bowie pulls out a knife. Okay. Now nobody complains about that. "Why did he have a knife?" or "Does this mean all white people have knives?" Obviously there is a double standard involved with this *Sweetback* stud business. The fact was there were social and economic reasons behind having sex in the film, when you consider I was faced with no black distributors, very few black-owned theaters, and much of our shooting had to be done non-union because unions would not hire Third World people, and so on. I got around much of this because the union people thought I was making a porno movie and they don't care much about porno movies. They more or less left us alone. One idiot can throw a stone in the water that three wise men can't fish out. I'm not interested in fishing out stones. Walk down the streets and ask the brothers if they know Lerone Bennett, or if they know me. See what *they* say. Me, I've got enough to do just keeping my game up tight and opening up new possibilities that will help train more blacks in the cinema and theatrical professions.

Penthouse: Opening up opportunities for a few more blacks on an individual basis is a long way from using the media to raise the consciousness of blacks in general.

Peebles: Folks have got to look at themselves before they can raise their consciousness. Everybody wants to start at point 12 in the conversation when they haven't even defined the terms. The first thing you do in maths, for example, is explain what pi is. You don't just start throwing sines and cosines around. The first thing we have to do is to define our terms. If you want to know the message of *You Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, you're ass backwards. You should be looking at the play as a definition. It is for you to decide what the message is after you understand the definition of the terms. The definition is that black people are programmed for genocide, socially, spiritually, and so forth. So that's the definition I advanced in that play. Until black people understand and see that image, they cannot really place themselves in the superstructure or even have a glimmer of hope. Now you may not agree with this, but this is what I am trying to do over and above those pseudo-literate fuckers who sit around starving to death, not getting to the people they say they want to get to, being dependent on the man and selling out in the end for a piece of crumb of recognition. The kind of theater I'm into obviously requires new thinking. I don't deal in the details of racism. America is racist from the fucking Post Office to the Army, to the toilets. If it's bad, it's bad and it is up to the writers and artists to say it's bad. I mean, Lord save me from the white liberals and black committees that weigh on my little toe. Get the fuck off my toe.

Penthouse: It's one thing to talk about doing it as an individual, but what about group thrust and involving yourself in political action?

Peebles: What I'm trying to do is get to the edges of peoples' awareness where they can begin to understand themselves and see the need for political struggle. But I have to be careful. It's very easy to nickel dime and quarter and half-dollar me to death. I can't be in every place. I can't train the technicians and attend somebody's church meeting on Sunday and talk at Bennett College on Friday and get anything done. It requires a great deal. It's like me writing a book in Russian. It's not impossible, but I've got to sit down and learn Russian, all of its intricacies and so on. I am having enough trouble with this little small field of expertise. To get into the black political thing is a task I can't handle concurrently. Too often we become victims of our own racism. Black boxers suddenly become experts capable of commenting on the whole spectrum of world events, totally outside the shallow area of their expertise. Well, I just don't see myself in that kind of hustle. In retrospect, it's very easy to explain everything but I'll limit myself to my own narrow area of expertise and make that effective.

Penthouse: Limiting yourself to that area, what next?

Peebles: Damn, I don't know. I'm locked into projects for the next two years, it seems. I'm off to California to edit *Don't Play Us Cheap*, my musical, which I filmed prior to its Broadway run. After that I'll be doing the same thing on a film I hope to make called *The True American*. It's a social comedy about the human condition, two guys, one black and one white who plot an escape from hell. What happens to them when they make it back to earth will, I hope, be funny and satirical.

Penthouse: Melvin Van Peebles, thank you.

